

The Judah P. Benjamin Story: Relics of Three Careers

By Stella Pitts

THE house is still impressive and bears a few traces of its past elegance. The unusual "bow and arrow" design in the iron grillwork still graces the second-floor gallery, and high up on the roof, where few passers-by notice them anymore, are nine intricately-carved dormer windows.

But the mellowed-brick walls have been hidden by coats of peeling green paint, and the two large ground-floor windows are permanently sealed. Inside the entryway, the beauty of the massive door is lost due to the flashier attractions of a huge poster on which a dancing nude advertises "table-top dancing, bottomless and topless, no cover, no admission."

The house's neighbors are a well-known cocktail lounge, currently featuring "12 go-go girls on hand," and, on the other side, an adult movie house. The house itself flaunts a large black and white sign embossed with the campy caption "Judah P's Living Room."

Nothing surprising about this, of course, as long as you remember you're on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. But it takes a good deal of imagination to realize that the house was once the home of a man who was ranked as the most prominent New Orleanian of the 19th Century and the possessor of perhaps the most brilliant legal mind in the South—Judah P. Benjamin.

The story of this man's life and career is one of the most fascinating recorded in the history of America. Rising from penniless obscurity as the son of Spanish Jewish parents, Benjamin climbed to the top of three separate careers during his lifetime. He served as a United States senator from Louisiana, then as Secretary of State for the Confederacy, and finally as a high-ranking barrister in England.

And although it was in New Orleans that he developed his tremendous legal abilities and gained nation-wide prominence, there are few reminders of him in the city today.

The house at 327 Bourbon Street is known in the guide books as the Judah P. Benjamin House, but a visitor can find no evidence that he ever lived in it.

To the right of the huge entrance hall, graced by another flashy poster, are the old double parlors of the mansion, now the double bar-room and entertainment area of the cocktail lounge. Although the deep red carpet, dingy dark walls and dim red lighting make it difficult to see, it is still possible to imagine what these rooms must have looked like when Benjamin, his wife and her parents lived here 138 years ago.

The original woodwork around the massive doors and window frames is ornamented with small carved wooden discs—now painted dull gold—and two huge antique mirrors reflect the tables and chairs and the pop-art posters on the walls. Beneath the mirrors are heavy marble mantels, yellow with age, which may possibly be as old as the house. One of them is barely discernible behind the bar, where it is used to hold a large display of liquor bottles.

In the center of the high ceilings in both rooms are perfectly preserved medallions—minus their chandeliers but still elegantly beautiful.

THESE two rooms contain the only elaborately carved woodwork left in the house. Nearby, a winding staircase leads to the second and third floors and the fourth-floor attic, all deserted now and used only for storage. Wallpaper peels in huge strips from the stained walls. These upper floors were extensively damaged in Hurricane Betsy and never repaired.

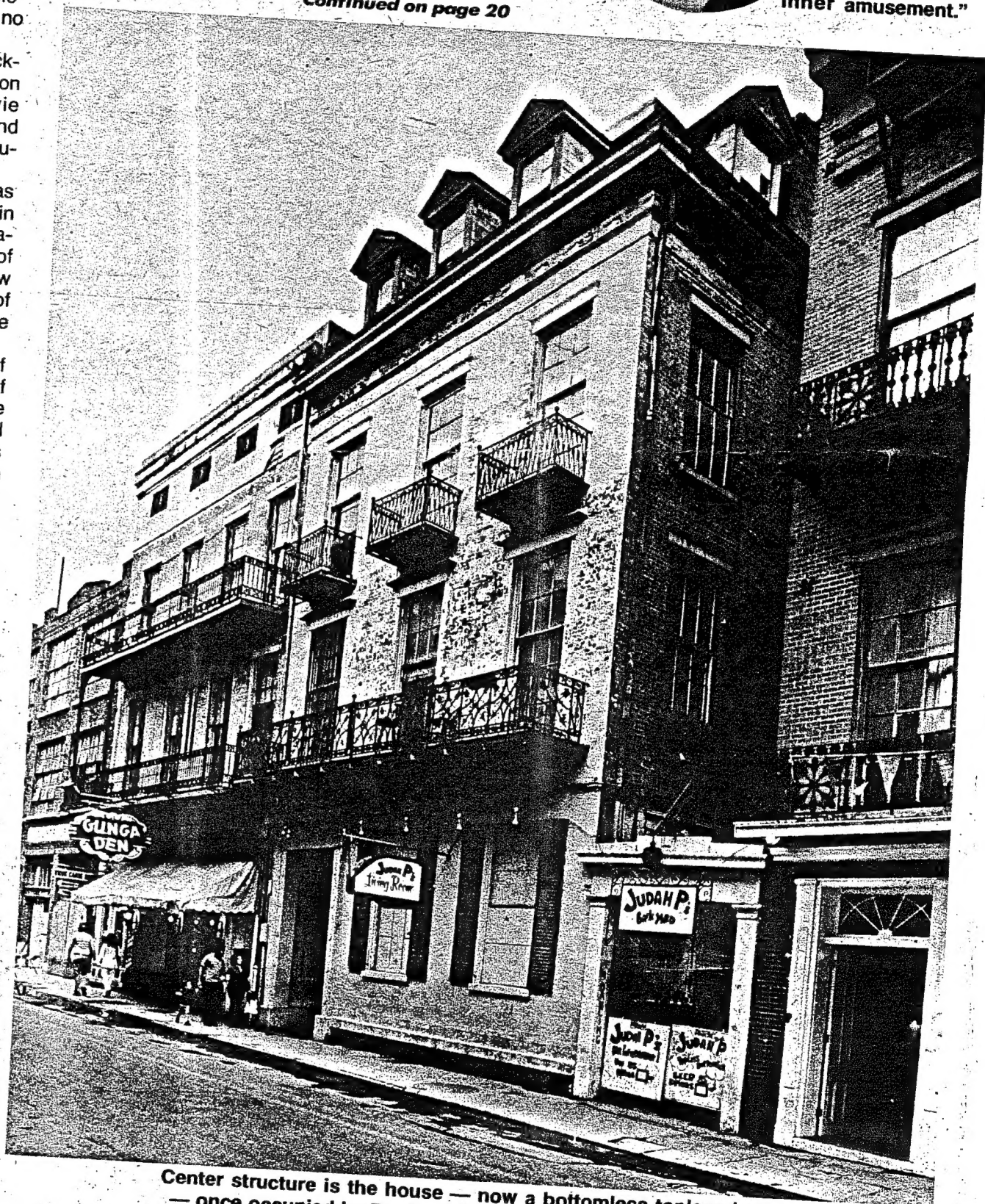
Outside, the old slave quarters are dusty and neglected and heaped with a motley assortment of

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Judah P. Benjamin in portrait showing his "sly smile of inner amusement."

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Center structure is the house — now a bottomless-topless lounge — once occupied by Benjamin, his wife, Natalie, and her parents.

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old furniture and boxes. The courtyard is now dubbed "Judah P's Backyard," and contains a bandstand and tables and chairs. To the rear is the old carriage house, topped by dirty but still graceful fanlight windows. This, too, is used only for storage.

The current owner of the lounge, Martin Smith, is quite familiar with the story of Judah P. Benjamin but says he sees no reason to inform his customers that the house has any historical significance. "It seems rather incongruous with what's going on in here now," he commented. And has anyone ever inquired if this were once the home of a famous man?

"No, but a lot of people ask me if it used to be a high-class house of prostitution," Smith replied.

The magnificent plantation home which Benjamin built six miles below New Orleans, "Bellechasse," was torn down in 1960 after efforts to preserve it failed from lack of funds and interest.

THE story of Bellechasse is tragically similar to that of far too many of Louisiana's grand plantation houses. After Benjamin sold his interest in the plantation, the property went through the hands of many owners, and, in the process, into a steady decline. In the early 1920s, the newly-organized Judah P. Benjamin National Memorial Association purchased the house and a few acres and began plans to restore it.



ce was part of Benjamins' double parlor. Note
1. Underneath bottles is original marble mantel.

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View of former courtyard of the Benjamin house, now known as
"Judah P's Backyard." In the background is former carriage house.

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... Judah

P.

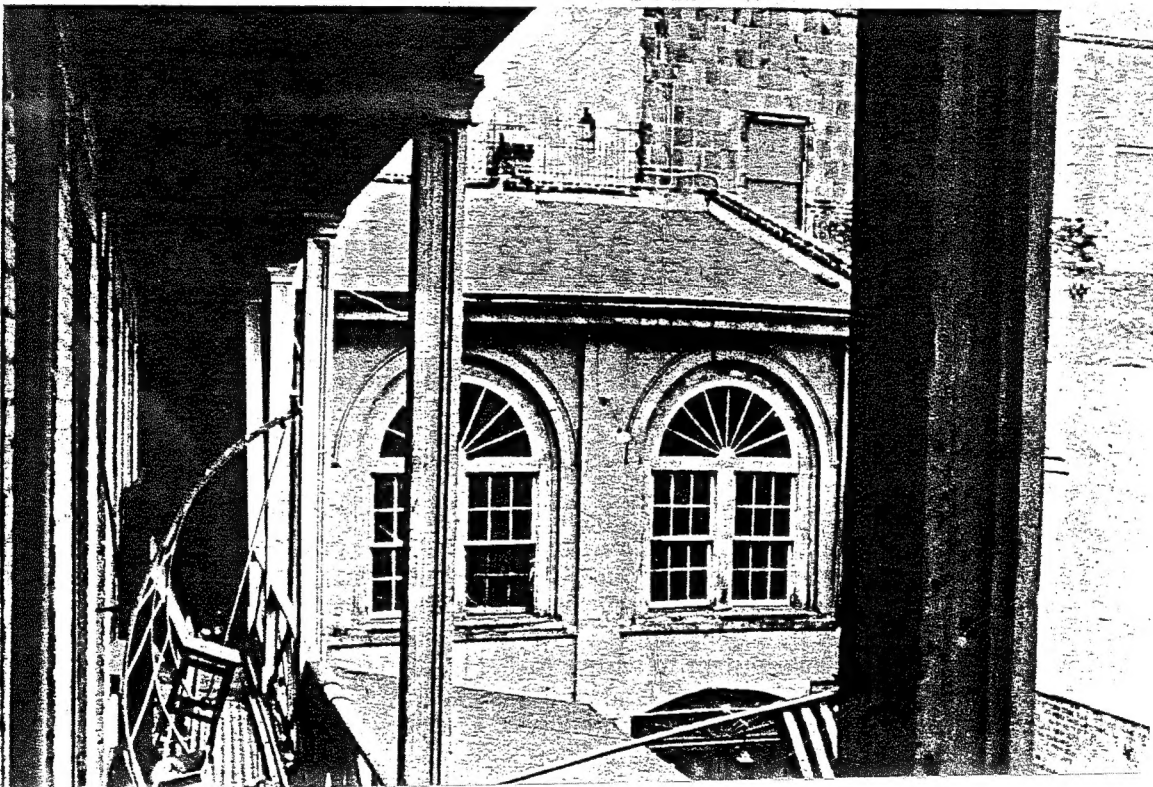
Benjamin ...

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museum by The Times-Picayune Publishing Cor-
poration. Also owned by the museum but currently
in storage are several of Benjamin's personal ef-
fects, including a broadcloth suit, two pair of
gloves, two black ties, and some patent leather
shoes with silver buckles.

When Benjamin died in 1884, the London
Times carried a long article on "one of the most
remarkable of modern careers" and declared that
Benjamin's life "was as various as an Eastern tale,
and he carved out for himself by his own unaided
exertions not one but three histories of great and
well-earned distinction."

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... Judah P. Benjamin

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HE was born in 1811 on the island of Saint Croix in the Virgin Islands and came to this country with his parents two years later, settling first in North Carolina and finally in Charleston. In 1825 the young Judah Philip Benjamin was sent to Yale (he was only 14) and remained there until his junior year, when he left abruptly, reportedly after engaging in gambling activities with other students.

It wasn't long before he arrived in New Orleans to seek his fortune, reportedly with only \$5 in his pockets. He immediately liked the carefree spirit and bustling prosperity of the city and decided to stay. After a brief period of work in a mercantile house, he was hired as a clerk for a local notary and, possessed of enormous drive and energy, he began to give private lessons in English and to study law in his spare time.

In four years, he was admitted to the Louisiana bar, and in February of 1833, he married the 16-year-old daughter of a prominent Creole family, Natalie St. Martin, whom he had met as English teacher. Her father, Auguste St. Martin, was an official of a New Orleans insurance firm, and the young couple lived with her family for a year or two in their home on Chartres Street (now torn down) and then moved to the new four-story townhouse which St. Martin built on Bourbon Street about 1835.

Natalie and Judah Benjamin were as uncongenial a pair as could be imagined. He was well-educated, intellectual and Jewish; she was selfish, shallow, and Catholic. She cared little for her husband's ambitions and career and seemed to have a fondness only for a gay, social life. After about 10 friction-filled years in the Bourbon Street house, Natalie left for Paris, where she remained for the rest of her life with their one daughter, Ninette. Benjamin remained devoted to her throughout his life, visiting her at least once a year and living near her during his last years.

LEFT alone in New Orleans, Benjamin pulled himself together and began his rise to prominence. (He continued to live with the St. Martins for several years and handled the sale of the Bourbon Street house when they, too, moved to Paris in 1853.)

During the 1840's, Benjamin's legal career prospered and gained him nation-wide prominence, mainly in the fields of commercial and insurance law. He entered politics and was elected to the lower house of the Louisiana Legislature in 1842, and he bought a half interest in a large sugar plantation below the city, already named "Bellechasse" after an earlier owner.

He and his friend, attorney Thomas Slidell, published a "Digest of the Reported Decisions of the Superior Court of the Late Territory of Orleans and the Supreme Court of the State of Louisiana," which for many years was the standard work on Louisiana law.

And Benjamin served as the attorney for the heirs of the eccentric New Orleans multimillionaire John McDonogh when they tried to break his will, in which McDonogh had left the bulk of his huge fortune to the cities of New Orleans and Baltimore to establish schools for the poor. Benjamin won the case in Louisiana but eventually lost it in the Su-

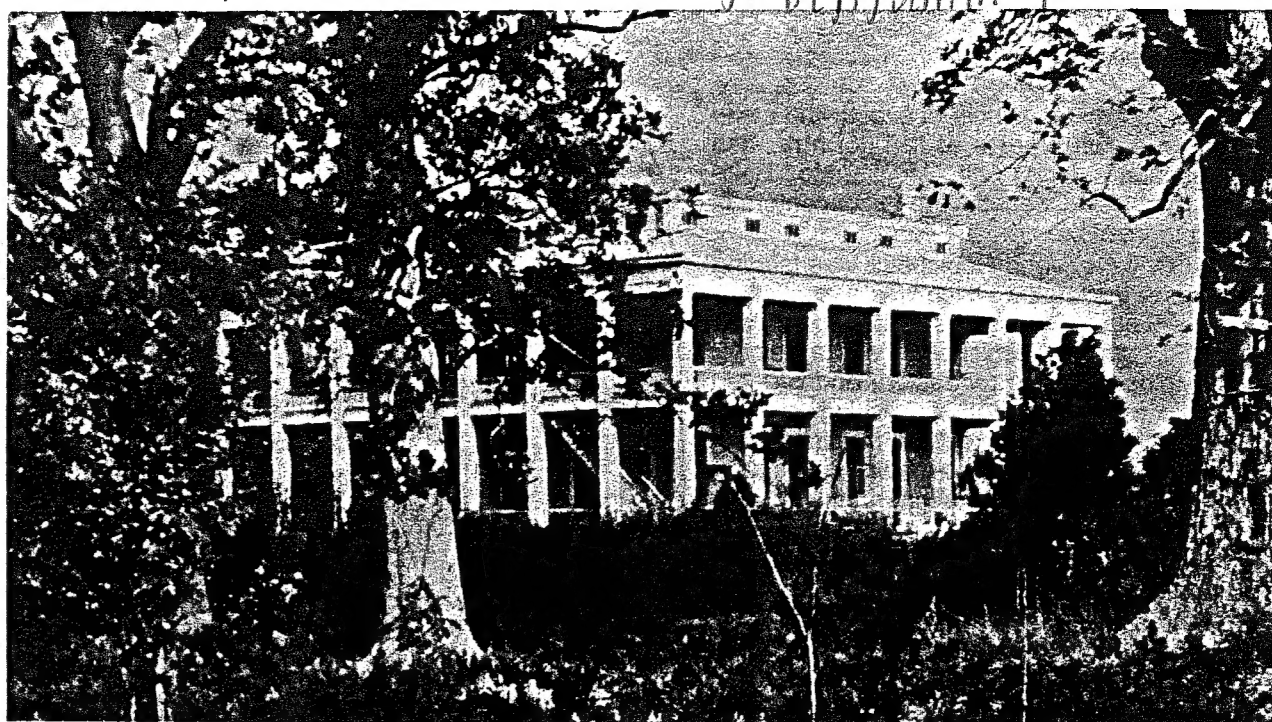


Photo of the Bellechasse Plantation home made about 1950, after some renovation and about 10 years before house was demolished.

preme Court. However the case gained him more prominence than any other with which he was associated.

He also was active in the promotion of railroad development and was one of the original directors of the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroad Company.

In the words of his biographer, Robert Meade, Benjamin "grew with New Orleans and absorbed her point of view—cosmopolitan yet very Southern, commercially progressive yet politically conservative—and he became enamoured of the city's way of life."

He invited his mother and widowed sister to come to New Orleans to live with him, and he soon tore down the existing house at Bellechasse Plantation and built a magnificent mansion—a three-story, 20-room, square house surrounded by double balconies supported by 28 square cypress columns. Here, amid crystal chandeliers, a spiral mahogany staircase and lavish furnishings, he entertained his friends from New Orleans, with his mother and sister serving as hostesses in the absence of his wife.

HERE also, Benjamin became a noted pioneer in experimenting with new methods of sugar production.

Shortly after his election as a state senator in 1851, he became a leading candidate for United States senator and was elected the following year. He was given a farewell banquet at the St. Charles Hotel by his fellow members of the prominent Boston Club, and very soon after he arrived in Washington, he became the first Jewish person to be nominated to the United States Supreme Court. But he turned down the nomination, made by President Millard Fillmore, to remain active in politics.

Selling his interest in Bellechasse in 1853 and acquiring two new law partners to handle his New Orleans practice, John Finney and Edward Bradford, Benjamin left New Orleans to devote himself to national politics, a legal practice before the Supreme Court, and various business projects.

Although he returned periodically to visit his sisters here (his mother had died in 1847), Benjamin by this time had replaced his New Orleans career with activities on a national level. He was an influential member of the Southern party in the Senate and moved in the best circles of Washington society, but he continued to support

his two sisters and their children, as well as his younger brother Joseph.

AFTER his re-election to the Senate in 1859, Benjamin rented the elegant Stephen Decatur Mansion on Lafayette Circle near the White House, filled it with elegant furnishings, and optimistically brought Natalie there to live. The society ladies of Washington, full of stories they had heard of Natalie's behavior in Paris, called on her out of respect for Benjamin. But she remained only a few months, departing unexpectedly one night (reportedly to meet a handsome German officer) and leaving instructions for all the elegant furnishings to be auctioned to the highest bidders.

Benjamin was crushed and wanted to leave Washington and abandon his career, but his friends persuaded him to remain and continue his important work. Despite Natalie's behavior, Benjamin continued to support her for the rest of their lives, and there is no record that he ever sought a divorce.

As the Civil War drew closer and closer, Benjamin, as a leader of the extreme Southern party in the Senate, became one of the ablest and most eloquent defenders of the Southern point of view on slavery and states' rights. But the aggressive stand he advocated was to be made within the Union.

NEVERTHELESS, when Louisiana seceded from the Union in January of 1861, Benjamin, along with fellow senator John Slidell, resigned from the Senate in a moving farewell speech. A month later, he was appointed Confederate attorney general for six months—a post too unimportant for a man of his abilities—and then was made secretary of war. His administrative talents served him well in this post, although he knew next to nothing about military matters, and in March of 1862, he was named secretary of state and consequently became the most important cabinet officer in the Confederate government.

He became Jefferson Davis' closest advisor, although a few years earlier the two men had argued violently in the Senate and come close to fighting a duel. An interesting word portrait of Benjamin during this time was given by Mrs. Davis:

"Mr. Benjamin was always ready for work; sometimes with half an hour's recess, he remained with the executive from 10 in the morning until nine

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at night . . ." and "no matter what disaster befell our arms after he had done all in his power to prevent or rectify it, he was never depressed. No reverses tortured him exceedingly, as they did Mr. Davis, who, though he was too reticent and self-controlled to betray his anguish, suffered like one in torment. Mr. Benjamin was serenely cheerful, played games, jested and talked as wittily as usual." It was said of Benjamin that his perpetual sly smile of inner amusement infuriated his enemies but somehow brought comfort to the harassed Jefferson Davis. Questioned by the Davis' about his attitude, Benjamin answered that he believed there was a fate in the destiny of nations and that it was wrong and useless to disturb oneself and thus weaken one's energy to bear what was foreordained. In the words of a friend, Benjamin "had a good appetite for his dinner, drank his wine, smoked his cigar, and took life like a philosopher."

An interesting footnote to Benjamin's history is the fact that although his wife lived apart from him in Paris, her brother Jules was one of Benjamin's closest friends and remained with him in Richmond throughout the war. He seems to have adopted Benjamin's somewhat fatalistic attitude toward events. When he received the news of the fall of New Orleans in 1862, Jules St. Martin was asked if this catastrophe had not affected him drastically.

"I am ruined, that is all," he replied, with a characteristic shrug.

"What was foreordained" happened on April 2, 1865, when Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered. The Confederate government officials fled Richmond for various locations in Virginia and North Carolina, trying to evade arrest. Benjamin vowed he would

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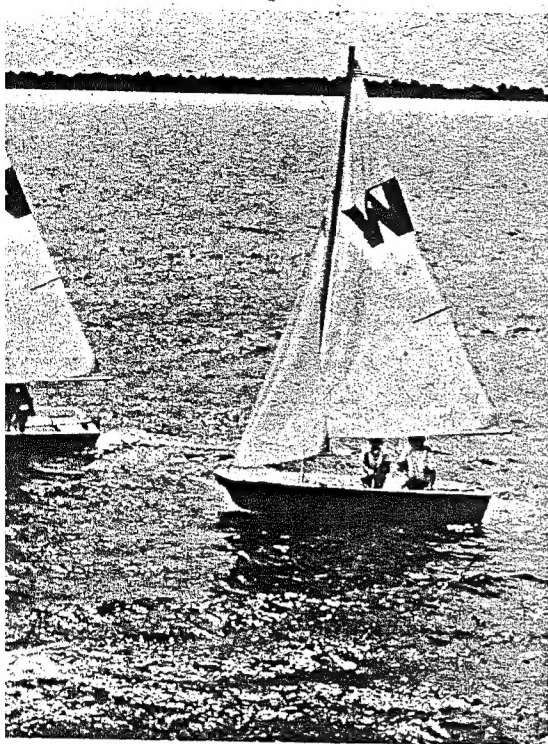
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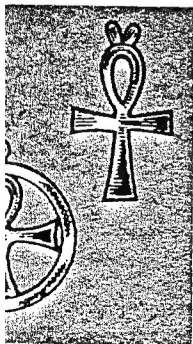
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Benjamin and his wife, Natalie, whom he married when she was 16. The marriage was a stormy one, and after 10 friction-filled years, Natalie left New Orleans for Paris where she remained with her daughter for the rest of her life. Benjamin, however, remained devoted to her, visited her, and lived near her during his final years.



... Judah P. Benjamin ...

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never be taken alive, and, leaving with friends a trunk containing all his belongings except what he wore and carried in his hands, he left the Davis party in a desperate attempt to escape from the fast-pressing Yankees. (He also left \$900 in gold for his sisters, who had moved to Georgia after the fall of New Orleans.)

Disguised as a Frenchman, "Monsieur Bonfals," Benjamin crossed the Georgia border and entered Florida. After a hazardous journey to the coast, he finally reached Nassau and then Havana and in August he arrived in Southampton, England. He was never to see the United States again.

He settled in London and in a few years was a leading member of the British legal profession. He was appointed a Queen's Counsel, in 1870, for Lancashire County and he wrote a highly regarded law book, entitled "A Treatise on the Law of Sale of Personal Property, with Reference to the American Decisions, to the French Code and Civil Law," but commonly known as "Benjamin on Sales." It was the prime text on its subject both in England and in the United States for many years.

During these years in England, Benjamin visited often in Paris with Natalie and Ninette. He continued to be interested in Louisiana affairs, contributed generously to the support of his relatives in this country, and in later years was frequently visited by many friends from Louisiana and other Southern states.

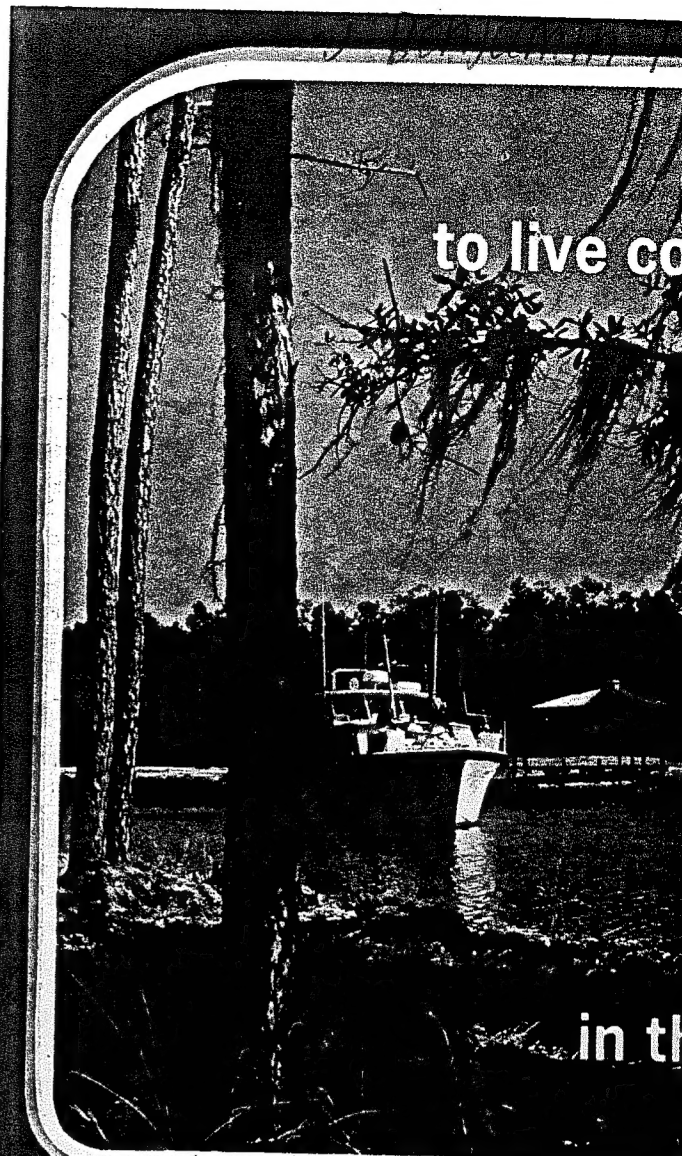
When Benjamin retired from practice in 1883, the attorney general, on behalf of the Bar of England, honored him at a farewell dinner in the Inner Temple attended by the most distinguished members of the legal profession in England. No American lawyer had ever before been given such recognition.

The London Telegraph declared that "the history of the English bar will hereafter have no prouder story to tell, than that of the marvelous advance of Mr. Benjamin from the humble position he occupied as a junior in 1866 to the front rank of his profession in 1883."

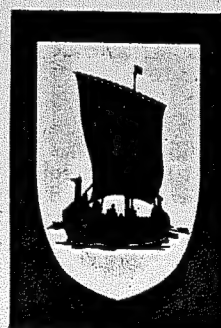
Suffering from a heart ailment, Benjamin died at his home in Paris on May 6, 1884. Natalie reportedly had a priest give her Jewish husband the last rites of the Catholic Church and then buried him with a Catholic service. For years his tomb bore inscriptions only for the families of St. Martin and de Bousignac (the name of Ninette's husband). It remained for the Paris chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy to place a marker on his grave in 1938.

Twenty years after the Civil War, Jefferson Davis wrote that Judah P. Benjamin was "a master of law and the most accomplished statesman I have ever known."

Preservationists and historians may deplore the situation, but it is doubtful if Benjamin, were he able to return to New Orleans today, would be too much concerned to find his plantation home torn down and his townhouse converted into a cocktail lounge. Doubtless he would smile that enigmatic smile of his, shrug his shoulders and saunter off down the street, declining to disturb himself over "what was foreordained."



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